

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 37: Internet Traffic Reports ***

Back in issue 27, I wrote about two Internet diagnostic tools, Ping and Traceroute. That has been one of the most popular editions of NetAnswers Internet Extra so far. I know a good thing when I see it, so this issue we'll take a closer look at another kind of network diagnostic tool: Internet "traffic report" web sites.

-.-.- Internet Traffic Reports -.-.-

Traffic report sites can give you an instant and clear idea of how the Internet is behaving at the moment. From day to day -- heck, from minute to minute -- the speed and quality of Internet connections can vary considerably. There are a zillion variables that affect the Internet as a whole as well as your connection. An especially heavy network load in your area or even a crashed router thousands of miles away can thwart you, resulting in slow connections, high lag time ("latency"), or dropped packets.

So you've tried Ping and Traceroute and have determined that your link to your ISP is working and its link to the outside world is up -- more or less. But the web seems especially slow, or some sites won't come up at all. It's a good time to get the traffic report. (Even if you're network connection is humming along perfectly, visiting these sites can be very educational and sort of fun.)

There's nothing magical about how these sites work -- they do their job by pinging various servers on the Internet and displaying information about these connections in an easy-to-read format.

A good place to start is the Internet Traffic Report (<http://www.internettrafficreport.com>). When you visit this site, you see a map of the world. For each continent there's a meter showing its "traffic index". The traffic index is a number from one to 100 -- higher numbers mean better connections to that place. You can tell at a glance if the Net is congested and what countries currently have access problems. The site also shows the average time for a packet to get there and back, as well as the average number of dropped packets (numbers that will be familiar to you if you've played with Ping yourself).

It's amazing how low the numbers can be while still producing fairly decent connections for web pages and downloads. Important information like web pages and e-mail can usually get through, even on connections with large packet loss: if a TCP packet isn't received, it is re-sent. Resending information takes extra time, though.

Internet Traffic Report pings many different computers and networks on each continent to generate these numbers. Now click on one of the continents to zoom in the details. Clicking on North America today, I see that backbones (major pipelines that move information long distances) to San Francisco and Seattle are working well, but connections to New York and Detroit leave a lot to be desired.

The Internet Weather Report is a similar site with a similar name. It offers a plain interface without the graphics and doodads of Internet Traffic Report. The biggest difference is that Internet Weather Report (<http://www.internetweatherreport.com>)

www.internetweather.com/) focuses on connections to name servers. (Name servers are the computers that translate between Internet names that people use, like www.yahoo.com, and the numerical addresses that computers use, like 204.71.200.66. Name servers are a vital link in Internet connectivity.)

It's important to remember that these sites provide information about Internet connectivity from their server. Since they may be in a different city, on a completely different backbone network than you, their outlook can be very different from yours -- or from other weather report sites. You can prove it to yourself by visiting <http://routes.clubnet.net/iw/> -- that's the Internet Weather from ClubNET. It uses software similar to the Internet Weather Report, but can show problems connecting to sites that IWR sees as perfect. Why? One's in Southern California and one is in Central California. And they use different backbone networks -- MCI and SprintNet. While these traffic sites can give you an idea of what's going on out there, remember the universal disclaimer: your mileage may vary.

I've saved my favorite site for last: the MIDS Internet Weather Report at <http://www.mids.org/weather/>. It superimposes information about Net connectivity on top of maps -- areas with connection problems are highlighted with circles. The size and color of the circles indicates the latency and number of domains affected. You can see a world map or focus on certain countries or states. You can see still maps, or if your browser has Java, cool animated maps that show changes in network congestion over time. I don't know if this is useful, but it is fun.

=*=*= SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*=*=

Internet Traffic Report: <http://www.internettrafficreport.com>

Internet Weather Report: <http://www.internetweather.com>

Internet Weather from ClubNET: <http://routes.clubnet.net/iw/>

MIDS Internet Weather Report: <http://www.mids.org/weather/>

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

Copyright 1998 by Kevin Savetz.